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## Boxing Ears: Music, Performance and Out of the Box 2010

### David Megarrity

Brisbane's Out of the Box Festival of Early Childhood is a much loved winter event, well known to readers of Lowdown and lovers of performance for audiences aged 3-8. Taking place at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre for one week in June, it's a big day out for families and school groups. It excites minds and tires out legs, little and large.

Artistic Director Rose Myers' program for the festival had Brisbane's QPAC awash with sound. Every performance utilized music in many different ways. I spent the week with my ear to out of the box. There was much to hear.

In the Cascade Court the fountain is dry, but the '**World Stage**' pumped all day, flanked by plumes of sausage-flavoured smoke. High energy acts were thrust at us all day. **Elicit Inc's** hip hop locked in to their juddering, mashed up soundtrack with mischief and joy. But where were the quiet spaces?

"If you're 0-3 come sing with me!" - a modest sign invites us in into an intimate space, walled by parents and carers, where littlies listen and move. They gently participate in songs about snakes that go up and down, physicalising basics such as pitch and rhythm. **Annie Petersen** is unerringly courteous and encouraging of her charges, and there's a focus and pleasure in the *doing* of music here that shuts out all else.

In Studio 2, is Windmill's **Grug**. Here the performers appear to soundtrack their own action with an onstage LP record player, the quiet crackle and 'turn the page when you hear this sound' chimes segmenting the performance. **DJ Trip's** sonic palette includes synthesized low harps and double basses, punctured with the occasional swanee whistle (the classic sound of 'something going up') and occasional low-key beats for action sequences.

Eventually Grug is presented with the gift of music (in the form of a Vinyl record) to which we dance. Despite the prevalence of DJ culture, young children often refer to LP's as 'big CD's'. The inclusion of retro sound equipment could easily have been a gratuitous design conceit, but here, its schmaltz-free understatement works, and the sounds are a springy cushion for the simple drama.

In **Amococo**, we're bathed in Irish composer **Michael Morris's** 'Song of Danu', a deceptively simple ambient 19 minute loop of a few tones blended with a synth weft, augmented by indistinct sounds which could be birds or whales. This music has been touring with the inflatable luminarium for 14 years. It's as glorious as a cathedral and as welcoming as a womb. Exactly the kind of environment you might need after having waited 90 minutes in a queue with a very tired child to enter.

After the glorious tones of the Klais organ fill the Concert Hall it's all downhill for **Lemony Snicket's The Composer Is Dead**, composed by **Nathaniel Stookey**. It's thorny bunch of clichés: a series of high culture musical in-jokes,

often relying on ethnic stereotypes, which present as an introduction to the orchestra.

The murder-mystery narrative is pitched way too high for even the oldest children here, and most of the laughter in the auditorium is low-pitched adult chortle. It's well-performed by Bryan Probets, but he's often describing instruments we can't see. They're hidden behind music stands, and played by a fine orchestra who, while willing to role-play with the actor, won't actually stand up and show us their instrument.

**"The List Operators for Kids present: More Fun Than a Wii!"** is shoved at us, cut and pasted on bits of old cardboard, and it's a hoot. Sonically, too, it's cut up: it seems like they're using whatever's available. A blast of '70's rock strut 'The Eye of the Tiger' or some 1950's big-band is glued over a deliberately clumsy transition. It's this 'let's put on a show in our lounge room' feel, as well as the show's skilful anarchy that invites us in, but there's more going on here.

Music issues mostly from a laptop on a card table onstage, and there's a sequence where a scene and its sound effects are dissected for us. The acting is pathetic, the sound effects are worse, and it's hilarious. It's a juxtaposition of the ancient art of Foley with 'new technology'. What the List Operators (Rich Higgins and Matt Kelly) are doing here, we realize, is training one of us to operate the sound cues for their show.

Once a child has volunteered, and 'Take Two' of the scene begins, it becomes clear that the sound effects are perhaps deliberately out of order: in another context this could be seen as setting the child up for failure for comic effect, but combined with the apparent ineptitude of the List Operators it seems an acknowledgement that the average child would know how to operate sound on a laptop better than 90% of the adults in the room.

Circa's **On Air** groups danglings, balancings and liftings into an open narrative focused on the three performers questing for flight. The music here is initially calming: muted pianos, harps, gut-string guitars lull us into its glowing pastel world. Techno stylings enter later, ably offering the tension the routines need, and occasionally dignifying the action with broad genre strokes of a classical string quartet or basketball organ. The soundtrack, by **Darrin Verhagen** with **Chris Vik**, is operated live, and is woven with prerecorded voices of children. These verbal 'Ooohs', 'Ahhs', swishes and giggles are integrated into the musical text, acting as a kind of bridge between the wide-eyed characters onstage and the children that watch them.

In QPAC's largest venue, the Lyric Theatre, we experience the assembled power of a mass child audience. They jiggle and chatter like a giant brook, and are ready to rock. As the lights go down, they do what all the adults have been trained out of. They take a breath.

The lights come up on Patch Theatre's **Mr McGee and the Biting Flea**. It's quite an achievement musically. Kind of a 'Barbershoperetta'. **Timothy**

**Sexton** has marshaled the six rhythmic stories of Pamela Allen into the three harmony parts which the actors perform live. Today the presence of an Auslan interpreter in a spotlight on stage right lends a certain significance to the performance as a sonic experience. As well crafted as it is, there are few moments when the rhythm of the music had us involved and grooving. The children were ready to bounce along - but maybe we'll have to wait until Pamela Allen writes 'Mr McGee Gets Funk-ee.'

Children naturally explore the world in sound and music. They imitate others and create themselves. Living in the barrage that new technology brings, they select and curate music just like people who call themselves grown-ups do: music serves, as Tia DeNora says "...as a model of self, a resource for articulating and stabilizing self-identity."

Music holds stories and feelings close to us. When combined with performance, music goes beyond a simplistic meaning-control system that signifies the end of a scene or change of mood. These performances at OOTB often draw from sources well before the birthdates of the children in the audience - there are lots of pop culture references here - but they're at their best when unsullied by post-modern detachment. Children are already across all that. Nobody needs their ears boxed into one way of listening, or one set of signs. What's clear is how music can glue together and open up a narrative with joy and glee, in ways that transcend explanation.



Photo by Telia Nevile